

What Teens Want

What Libraries Can Learn from MTV

Erin Helmrich

Sometimes I wonder if I can handle one more glamorous day in the library: the swarms of teens begging me for a booktalk, the gangs of popular kids wishing they could be on my TAB, it gets to me. Can't I just go back to the days when only dorks and losers used the library?

I wish this were my life. I am a pop-culture addict with a "big picture" problem. I dream of a day when Eminem is the reason teens use my library. I dream of a day when "Got Library Card?" is the new celebrity cause—when Pink sings about her mom taking her to the library instead of serving her milk. Someday my dream will come true, but first we must change the way we think. What *do* teens want? We struggle to answer this question in a million different ways and with a million different solutions. The answers are all around us, but because we often insist on a "library model," we don't always look in the right places. Consider a different approach and choose a new viewpoint.

On October 27–28, 2003, at the Fairmont Miramar Hotel in Santa Monica, California, I attended the "What Teens Want: Marketing to Teens (ages 12 to 17) Using Music, Movies, and the Media" conference. I figured that a conference hosted, sponsored, and presented by the likes of *Adweek*, The WB, *Teen Vogue*, and *Billboard* might provide some interesting perspectives. I found the "true" audience for this conference was account executives in marketing, advertising, licensing, and brand management in industries like publishing, apparel and accessories, fashion, retailing, entertainment, telecommunications, and so on.

I had been eyeing this conference ever since it was originally scheduled in 2001. That year it was scheduled for November, was eventually cancelled, and

had been in renegotiations ever since. As a teen librarian with a pop-culture fixation, this conference was a perfect fit. What harder "sell" is there than the notion that the library can be a cool place?

MTV Is Doing Something Right

As an MTV baby from its inception, I was thrilled when I found out that the kick-off keynote was none other than Brian Graden, president of Entertainment at MTV and VH1 (and close personal friend of *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone). Under Graden's direction MTV has had some of its highest ratings with *The Osbournes*, *Cribs*, *Making the Video*, *Jackass* and *TRL (Total Request Live)*. If this were not proof of Graden's innate understanding of "what teens want now," the electrifying and inspirational talk he gave would be. He spoke about teens today with a passion and enthusiasm that was contagious. A few of his main points were:

- The technological divide will only widen. The more technologically savvy teens become combined with a complete lack of savvy amongst many adults will make it that much harder to "tune in" to their world, and to learn, ultimately what drives them.
- Teens today are much more adept at "cutting and pasting" their style, identity, and ideals with past and present, punk and prep—challenging us to the max.
- There is no sense of right or wrong—only gray. The Internet is their geography—a world with no rules, false identities, and downloading with the press of a button. In a world of "real-

ity" TV—based on lies—teens today are more likely to see the spin. They learn to play all sides.

Graden spoke at length about the combination of research and focus groups with pure inspiration, art, and ideas to come up with the magic that is MTV. Shows on MTV burn very fast—as they are expected to—but it is this ephemeral and elusive quality that drives the network's success. Ultimately, Graden's main recommendation is to be "in" the teen experience as much as possible. Listen to their music, watch their TV shows. Not only will the "teen themes" reveal themselves, but you will be reminded of the emotional search, which stays constant no matter what generation it is.

Breaking the Code

And it will only cost you \$15,000! Want to be as up to the minute as Abercrombie and Fitch? Then Irma Zandl is your woman. Her presentation "Values, Attitudes and Lifestyles: Through the Psychographic Lens" was mind blowing. Corporations pay Zandl Group \$15,000 a year for six bimonthly "hot sheet" reports. Zandl's (www.zandlgroup.com) New York-based consulting and research boutique specializes in young consumers, from tweens through young adults. With a consumer panel of teens numbering in the thousands, Zandl's anthropological

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Marketing Categories for Teenagers

Outlined by Irma Zandl of the Zandl Group

- 35 percent of teen boys are what she calls "Noisy Boys." Noisy Boys are urban and suburban, and ethnically diverse. The typical Noisy Boy will describe himself as "loud, crazy, and wild." He listens to 50 Cent, loves to party, only dates "hot chicks," plays *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, reads *XXL*, *Maxim*, and the *Source* while dreaming about owning an Escalade and wearing Sean John's duds. The Noisy Boy goes to www.ultrapasswords.com to access hacked words for free porn. He shops at www.coolkicks.com or www.funkmasterflex.com for his hip-hop inspired style.
- 35 percent of teen girls are "Limelighters." Limelighters are the counterpoint to the Noisy Boy. A Limelighter is typified by a love for dancing and performing. They love to speak out and can usually be seen at the mall with their cell phone. They love rap and pop divas. They read *CosmoGirl* and may shop at Victoria's Secret. Fragrance is must—as is wearing '80s-inspired fashion.
- 30 percent of teen boys are "Rough Riders." Rough Riders are rural or suburban, Caucasian and Hispanic boys usually on the noncollege track. The typical Rough Rider may join the military or learn a trade. Rough Riders like monster trucks, paintball, fishing and hunting, guns and ammo, the WWE's Rey Mysterio, heavy metal, dickies, Axe cologne, Dodge Vipers, and Chevy trucks.
- 30 percent of teen girls are "Nest Builders," the female counterpart to Rough Riders. Nest Builders are typically nurturing, home-oriented, down-to-earth girls. Nest Builders are "nice and sweet" girls who baby-sit, belong to church groups, collect things, have a hope chest, and listen to Christian rock or country music. Nest Builders watch *The OC* and *7th Heaven*, read *Teen People*, wear LEI jeans and Skechers while dreaming of driving a Pontiac Firebird, getting married, and starting a family.
- 20 percent of teen boys and 20 percent of teen girls are "Neo-Traditionalists." Neo-Traditionalists can be urban and suburban, but tend to be mostly Caucasian teens on the college-track. Neo-traditionalists are popular and smart and usually participate in sports. The typical Neo-Traditionalist goes to parties, travels abroad, and goes away to college. Neo-Traditionalists love American Eagle Outfitters, Adidas, Clinique, BMWs, Starbucks and Tommy Hilfiger. They read *Stuff* magazine, watch *Smallville*, and listen to Good Charlotte.
- 15 percent of teen boys and 15 percent of teen girls fall into the elusive "Indies" category. Indies are almost always "too cool" and their likes and dislikes can be so far from the mainstream that trying to attract them is very difficult. That said Indies are usually urban and suburban, ethnically diverse, idiosyncratic, quirky, and sometimes subversive. The "typical" Indie is into role-playing games, vampires and witchcraft, goth or punk, concerts, playing music, anime and manga, and martial arts. This group shops at Hot Topic, wears Converse and essential oils, listens to Marilyn Manson, writes fan-fiction, and reads *High Times* all while dreaming about driving a Mini-Cooper.

Clearly these categories are general and not all teens will fit into each group. Using these categories as a starting point one can certainly determine where the majority of your clientele falls. Let's admit that we often find ourselves "wishing" that a certain type of teen used the library—maybe it's the teens more like us, the teens who love to read fantasy or the teens that don't irritate the circulation staff so much. Whatever form it takes we have all been guilty of it at one time or another. When you know your audience, it is much easier to serve them.

approach is dead-on. Using their interests and attitudes as guideposts, Zandl can divide teens into various categories. These categories are by no means finite or universally applicable, but they do offer a baseline from which to build. Keep in mind that these categories change often—Zandl produces a hot sheet six times a year in order to keep her clients as up to date as possible, so use this information wisely, but don't count on it twelve months from now!

Teen Techno Savvy

Don't become road kill on the techno highway! How many of us use e-mail, chat, or text messaging to market the library to teens? Maybe those flyers you put out in the teen area just aren't cutting it anymore. According to Greg Clayman of Upoc, a mobile communications company, 51 percent of thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds own a mobile phone. A whopping 1.5 billion text messages are sent every month—about everything from homework questions to note passing to flirting. Technology has allowed today's teens to be "free agents" in choice. Camera phones, interactive TV, downloadable music, text messaging . . . teens have seamlessly integrated technology into their lives. Technology is part of the social currency of being a teen. From voting on *American Idol* to chatting with the stars of *Smallville*, teens use technology in ways that we aren't even aware of (a divide that will only increase with each new generation).

Reel Life

Done well, there are few mediums that can replicate the full-range of emotions and senses involved in living the way that film can. The directors of three recent, critically acclaimed "teen films" spoke at the conference. Catherine Hardwicke, the cowriter and director of *Thirteen*, Stacy Peralta, cowriter and director of *Dogtown* and *Z-Boys*, and Justin Lin, cowriter and director of *Better Luck Tomorrow* all shared their stories. Hardwicke was a particularly inspiring speaker. Her story about how she came to write *Thirteen*

with teenage friend (and star of the film), Nikki Reed, was the one compassionate voice heard at the conference. Hardwicke touched on the real life issues that affect teen's lives, and she challenged those in attendance to take a more humane approach to the conference's topics.

Real Teens

One of the only other youth advocates I met at the conference was Kate Dunlop Seamans, editor of *Teen Ink*. Seamans coordinated a fantastic teen panel featuring local Santa Monica high school students. While the twelve teens answered questions about cell phone ring tones, contests, music, and movies, what was most enjoyable was listening to their humor and candor—the ways in which they expressed their individuality while also identifying themselves as part of their generation. Proof that teens do heed “message” advertising, the teens noted that they liked “The Truth” anti-smoking ads. They responded to the provocative and edgy style of the ads, but also trusted the message.

The Rest

Other session topics were diverse: “Working with the Music and Entertainment Industries,” a keynote address from Ecko Unlimited Founder and CEO Marc Ecko titled “Cautionary Tales in the Teen Market,” and a panel titled “Reality Bytes: How to Build a Totally Authentic Experience for Teens” featuring Robert Thorne, CEO and Cofounder of Dualstar Entertainment (home of the Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen empire). Each of these sessions provided a unique glimpse into the world of marketing.

While some of the sessions were not as directly applicable to the library experience as others, the viewpoints and values discussed were diverse and, at times, fascinating. I enjoyed stepping out of the library zone and hearing from a business sector with a very different approach than libraries.

Networking and Partnerships

The true benefit of this conference was the connections and people that I met. There is an entire marketplace of teen-centric businesses that are dying to make new connections for “good causes.” I met the publisher of *Teen Vogue*, the president of Ed-U-Star, a music manager for several new teen music acts, a group of account execs from X-Box, people from Disney, MTV . . . the list goes on and on. The roster of conference attendees alone was worth the registration fee. I now have a list of names and contact information for influential executives from Nickelodeon, Clear Channel, Ford Motor, the WWE, Fox, The WB, and many, many more. In what other arena would librarians gain entree into the segment of the private sector actively seeking the teen market?

Now What?

Librarians need agents. Hey, if milk, meat, and bread need to advertise themselves, why shouldn't we? Competition is what drives the private sector and, to a greater extent every year, institutions like the YMCA and the library are no longer a given in the crowded marketplace. At a time when taxpayers are making tough choices about funding, we cannot afford to take our communities for granted. “They'll never close the library!” Why not? Many, many people live full lives without using their local library. Has your library proven its worth to the taxpayers?

What's your favorite commercial? Do you cry during Hallmark ads, sing along with the Gap ads—don't you feel better about all of your cotton clothing now that you know that it's the “fabric of our lives?” Good advertising is a powerful thing. Like The Truth (www.thetruth.com) ads, a library marketing campaign can be cool and authentic while also communicating important information. Why are all library promotions about reading? Our summer *reading* programs,

Teen *Read* Week, the *Read* posters. Is reading the only way our communities can enjoy the library?

Step out of your comfort zone, throw out the old rules, and try something new. Instead of surveying your teens about their library use or asking them what they want from the library ask your teens who they *are*!

- Never stop asking, because it never stops changing.
- Integrate teen pop-culture into your information seeking; what's popular often reveals a deeper truth about the audience it attracts.
- Change your approach. The library is a “brand” that you have to sell.
- Explore opportunities to integrate more technology into your publicity and promotion to teens. If you're lucky enough to have an in-house tech (or tech department), work with them to come up with creative ways to use emerging technologies with teens.
- Participate in the process yourself. Send a text message from your cell phone if you never have before or IM a friend the next time you're online.

The next time you're at the mall, look closely. Notice the signage, displays, use of color and fonts and imagine incorporating some of these ideas into the library setting. Take a closer look at commercials and advertising for teens. What are some of the techniques they use to grab teen dollars? Watch MTV for an hour. Study the shows, the ads, the music, the aesthetics. How can you replicate the MTV experience in the library?

Lastly, for those of you who mourn the “loss” of more traditional library service, or those of you who have a problem using consumerism as a tool to serve teens, consider this: libraries can either move forward and embrace the changes that are coming our way or they can become irrelevant antiquities. I, for one, would rather be a participant in the revolution, not a casualty of it. ●

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